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ABSTRACT

The practice of sustained silent reading (SSR) is based on the belief that motivation, interest, self-selection, modeling, and time spent reading contribute to student reading achievement. A study was designed to ascertain the prevalence of SSR in classrooms in a particular geographic area and the degree to which the program's original goals are being met. Ninety-six seventh-grade teachers from 32 school districts in 5 northeastern Pennsylvania counties were sent a survey regarding participation in SSR, organization of the program, material selection, and methods of evaluation; 69 teachers answered the survey. Findings suggest that silent reading is popular in the classroom in part because of the opportunities for instructional decision making it provides teachers. However, the individual implementation of the program has resulted in many aspects of the actual practice of SSR deviating from the original model. Questions regarding the integrity of current practices as compared to the original model are discussed, and suggestions to teachers who plan to implement or revise SSR programs are offered. (Contains 3 figures and 28 references. A sample survey is attached.) (Author/NKA)

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A Survey of Sustained Silent Reading Practices in Seventh-Grade Classrooms

By

Nancy M. Nagy, C. Estelle Campenni, and Janet N. Shaw

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A Survey of Sustained Silent Reading Practices in Seventh-Grade Classrooms

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Abstract

The practice of sustained silent reading (SSR) is based on the belief that motivation, interest, self-selection, modeling, and time spent reading contribute to student reading achievement. This article describes a study designed to ascertain the prevalence of SSR in classrooms in a particular geographic area and the degree to which the program's original goals are being met. Seventh-grade teachers were surveyed regarding participation in SSR, organization of the program, material selection, and methods of evaluation. Findings indicate that silent reading is popular in the classroom in part because of the opportunities for instructional decision making it provides teachers. However, the individual implementation of the program has resulted in many aspects of the actual practice of SSR deviating from the original model. Questions regarding the integrity of current practices as compared to the original model are discussed, and suggestions to teachers who plan to implement or revise SSR programs are offered.

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A Survey of Sustained Silent Reading Practices in Seventh-Grade Classrooms

Nancy M. Nagy
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Janet N. Shaw

Sustained silent reading (SSR) in the classroom involves students in reading self-selected material for an extended period. In some schools, SSR-type programs are called "DEAR" (drop everything and read), "SQUIRT" (silent, quiet, uninterrupted individualized reading time), or "USSR" (uninterrupted sustained silent reading). Although there are variations in format and implementation, the basic principles of time and ownership are the same.

The classroom use of SSR grew out of concern for student reading achievement. The program is based on the belief that self-selection motivates students to read with interest, and the resulting extended period of practice improves their reading achievement (Karweit & Slavin, 1981; Marliave, Fisher, & Dishaw, 1978). Another important element of SSR is modeling, based on the idea that effective learning results from following the example of another's model behavior (Bandura, 1986). As Hunt (1970) first described SSR, everyone in the school (students, teachers, administrators, secretaries, maintenance staff, etc.) was required to stop her or his usual work to read. Because everyone reads at the same time, students understand that the adults think that reading is important enough to engage in it themselves as a scheduled part of the busy school day.

Studies indicate that students who engage in SSR improve in both reading achievement and attitude toward reading (Bowermaster, 1986; Dionisio, 1989; Farrel, 1982; Oberlin & Shurgarman, 1989; Pilgreen & Krashen, 1993; Pyle, 1990). In addition, the kind of wide reading that occurs during SSR broadens students' background knowledge, providing them with a better base from which to relate to their subject area texts (Grubaugh, 1986). And the benefits of SSR seem to extend beyond the years of formal schooling. Tunnel and Jacobs (1989) found that adults who had been involved in a free reading or SSR program as students read more than did other adults. And adults who read more participate more in society and enter the workforce at higher levels (Guthrie, Shafer, Wang, & Afflerbach, 1995).

As SSR has become part of the curriculum in countless schools and districts, teachers have faced numerous challenges in implementing the program. In order to ascertain just what decisions teachers must make about key aspects of SSR, we constructed a 35-question survey that we hoped would yield a base of knowledge about how challenges were being handled in individual classrooms. The questions focused on participation (Who initiates the program? Who participates? Are they satisfied with the program?), organization (How often is it done? At what time of day?), material (Who chooses the material? What kinds of material are chosen?), and evaluation (Are there follow-up activities? Are grades given?). Since challenges in SSR implementation are often similar

from classroom to classroom, the information gained from the survey responses may provide direction for educators who are interested in using this particular approach as part of their literacy programs.

Methods

The survey sample included 96 seventh-grade reading teachers from 32 school districts in 5 northeastern Pennsylvania (USA) counties (Luzerne, Wyoming, Susquehanna, Wayne, and Lackawanna). The population of these counties is 655,588, 65 percent of which is urban and the remaining 35 percent rural. The survey included multiple-choice and open-ended questions, along with questions using a ten-point Likert scale. It was piloted with seventh-grade reading teachers to ensure clarity of wording of the questions and of the directions for completion. Adjustments were made on the basis of feedback from the pilot.

Along with the survey, each teacher in the sample received an accompanying letter that described the purpose of our research as "an effort to gain a better understanding of the extent to which sustained silent reading is being utilized...[in order to determine how] we can better serve our students." The teachers could request to receive a copy of the survey results, and they were told that their completion of the survey would enter them in a raffle for a $20 gift certificate from a school supply store. Follow-up letters were sent to those who had not responded two weeks after the initial mailing.

The decision to sample seventh-grade teachers was based on a number of factors. Beginning in the fifth grade or thereabouts, students often begin to change classes on a fairly rigid schedule during each school day. This practice of allotting a certain number of minutes to each subject area usually continues through high school. Therefore, from middle school onward teachers have numerous instructional goals and objectives that must be met during fixed time periods, and they must decide on the activities they will implement in order to achieve these goals and objectives. They must consider how much -- if any -- of this quite limited time they will devote to SSR.

In addition, when students reach the middle school years, they usually develop interests not expressly supported by community or school. Students of this age often enjoy reading nonacademic material such as comic books or fan magazines that do not form part of the curriculum, and occasionally they show a preference for books that include violence or sexually explicit content. Such selections pose a particular challenge for teachers who must balance appropriateness of text versus issues of personal preference and censorship.

Results

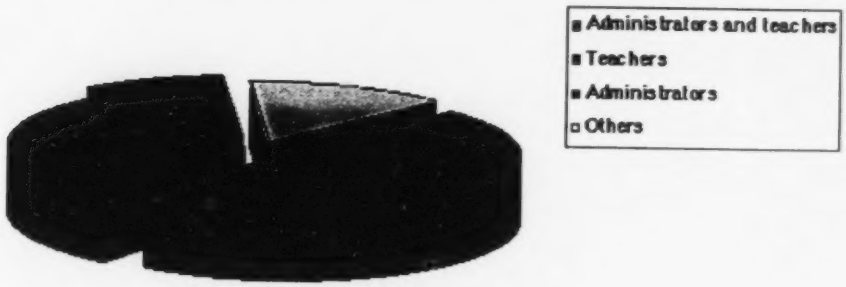
Of the 96 teachers contacted, 69 (72%) from 29 of the 32 (92%) school districts completed the survey. They reported that they had been teaching reading an average of 14.7 years, with an average of 9.1 years spent teaching in the seventh grade. Reading classes were estimated at 25 students, based on an average of 189 students enrolled in the seventh grade at each school.

Questions Focused on Participation *(survey questions 1-4, 6-8, 14, 24, 27, 28, 30-33)*

Two out of three teachers (67%) indicated that SSR was currently used in their schools. Nonusers of SSR had been teaching reading an average of 3 years longer than users. In schools employing SSR, reading classes were estimated at 31 students with an average total seventh-grade enrollment of 197. Among schools not employing SSR, reading classes were estimated at 24 students with an average seventh-grade enrollment of 172. Differences in terms of enrollment and class size between the user and nonuser groups were not statistically significant.

Teachers at 20 of the 23 schools (87%) where SSR was not currently in place indicated that they had used the program in the past. Lack of time and issues related to the students – such as their ability level or their coming to class without reading material -- were cited as reasons that the program was no longer implemented. In approximately three-quarters of these schools, teachers were at least partly responsible for the decision to stop the SSR programs (see Figure 1). More specifically, the decision to stop SSR was made jointly by administrators and teachers in 48 percent of these schools, while teachers were the sole decision makers in 29 percent. In 10 percent of the schools, administrators made the decision to stop the program, and in 14 percent, individuals other than teachers or administrators were the decision makers.

Figure 1
Personnel Responsible for Decision to Stop SSR



Among those schools where SSR was in use, it had been part of the reading program for an average of 6.8 years. Interestingly, while teachers were primarily responsible for the cessation of the program in schools where it had been discontinued, they were also instrumental in introducing SSR into the curriculum. Teachers reported that they were solely responsible for the implementation of the program in 63 percent of the schools surveyed, while an additional 35 percent worked with administrators to initiate the program. In only 2 percent of schools were other individuals reported as having been responsible for the introduction of the program.

The reasons that SSR had been introduced into the schools that continued to use it reflected the original goals for the program. Teachers indicated that they wanted to model the value of reading, provide students with the opportunity to read, and increase their students' reading vocabulary through active modeling.

It is interesting to note that SSR was used by all individuals in the building in very few schools (2%), in stark contrast to one of the basic precepts of the program. This may be explained by the fact that individual teachers are making the decision to implement SSR, rather than administrators mandating the practice for an entire building or district. However, among schools where SSR was in use, 80 percent of the teachers reported that they themselves always or usually read while the students did, and 17 percent reported that they read sometimes. Only 1 respondent reported never reading during SSR.

Teacher satisfaction with the SSR program was assessed using a ten-point Likert scale, where 1 indicated extreme dissatisfaction and 10 indicated extreme satisfaction. The average rating among respondents was 7.5, indicating that teachers are very satisfied with the program. This is not surprising because these teachers have a strong voice in decision making regarding SSR initiation and implementation. Additionally, the average rating of 7.9 that survey respondents assigned to perceived student satisfaction indicates that teachers believe that their students are also very satisfied with SSR. This, too, is not surprising since it is likely that part of the teachers' satisfaction is derived from the apparent student satisfaction with the program.

Questions Focused on Organization *(survey questions 9-13)*

Schools in the survey sample varied considerably in the frequency with which they used SSR in their curricula (see Figure 2). On average, SSR occurred 3 days per week, although approximately half the schools used the program less often (40% implemented it on 1 day only and 14% on 2 days) while 38 percent used it more often (12% implemented it on 4 days per week and 26% on 5 days). Further, while the average school spent 22 minutes per day in SSR, the range was from 4 to 50 minutes.

Figure 2
Frequency of Engagement in SSR

Four of ten teachers indicated that they would like to spend more time on SSR because they felt that students enjoyed it and that it motivated them to read. However, 59 percent of respondents indicated that they would not choose to increase the time spent on SSR because of overall time constraints in their classrooms. No teachers currently using SSR indicated that they would like to decrease the time allotted to it in their reading programs. Further, in the majority of schools surveyed (78%) the time allocated to SSR had remained stable from the preceding year, with only 8 percent of schools opting to reduce time spent in the activity. When teachers did decide to reduce time spent on the program, it was usually because of a perception that individual students were less responsive to it or less strong academically. These students were viewed as needing skills instruction, including vocabulary, more urgently than SSR. Some teachers (15%) indicated that they employed SSR at the beginning of the school year but discontinued it at some point because of the other demands of the curriculum.

In 85 percent of the schools where SSR was in use, the program occurred at a specific time of day, perhaps as a way to provide a transition between activities. Teachers indicated that they most often chose to have students engage in SSR during the last part of an instructional period, at the beginning of a period, at the beginning of the day, or on a specific day of the week (usually Friday).

Questions Focused on Material *(survey questions 17-22, 25, 26)*

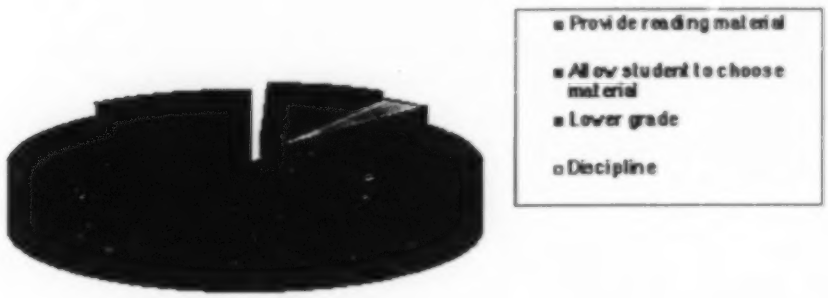
By definition, SSR is based on student self-selection of reading material. However, teachers did report monitoring students' selections in various ways. Approximately one school in five (22%) was very restrictive, requiring that students select their reading material for SSR from a school reading list. Thirty-five percent of schools were somewhat less restrictive; they provided lists of recommended reading. Lists of both required and recommended reading were reported as having been compiled by the

reading teachers themselves, librarians, or English teachers, or were drawn from textbook supplements. Student input on books for these lists was apparently not sought.

Sixty-nine percent of the teachers discouraged certain types of reading material, such as comics, magazines, textbooks, and newspapers, as well as material on certain topics that they deemed "unsuitable." Teachers were particularly concerned about pornography and violence. Of the 80 percent of teachers who reported reading themselves during SSR, books were the most popular choice by far at 65 percent, followed by magazines (15%) and newspapers (10%).

At times, students came to class without any reading material for SSR. Typically, teachers handled this problem in a low-key way (see Figure 3). Seventy-seven percent of the teachers in our survey reported that they provided material, while 11 percent allowed students to make a selection from the class library, a collection maintained in 93 percent of SSR classrooms. Some teachers (8%) indicated that they lowered a student's grade if SSR materials were forgotten, and only 4 percent responded with disciplinary action.

Figure 3
Actions Taken When SSR Materials Are Forgotten



Questions Focused on Evaluation *(survey questions 15, 16)*

The majority of the teachers (65%) did not evaluate students' SSR activities in any way, in keeping with the original design of the program. These teachers seemed strongly committed to a system free of grades, commenting, among other things, that "reading should be a spark to ignite a fire -- grades tend to throw water on the spark" and "if it is graded, it defeats the purpose of Reading Class...to become life-long readers." The 35 percent of teachers who did assign grades seemed similarly committed to their approach. They made comments such as "In order to value reading, students must be graded on the act of reading" and "It makes them accountable."

Of those teachers who did assign grades, oral and written book reports, journals or logs, teacher-made tests, discussion, conferences, oral questioning, and projects were cited as methods of evaluation. Some teachers also reported using the Accelerated Reader (AR) program, a commercial package that has students read books from a list (determined by the program's developers) and take computer -based comprehension tests on those books. Rewards and recognition are often given to those who read a certain number of books and pass the accompanying tests. Even if students are free to choose their reading material for SSR, in schools where AR is also in use it seems likely that books from the AR list will be selected most frequently since reading them affords the possibility of rewards and recognition.

Discussion

The practice of setting aside a part of the school day for silent reading is alive and well, based on the sample in the current study. Despite the fact that a few teachers have decided to discontinue the use of SSR, most continue to use some form of silent reading. In addition, most of the teachers who implement SSR express satisfaction with the program, possibly because of its strong element of teacher empowerment. For the most part, teachers feel that SSR helps them to achieve goals common to many reading curricula: developing students' positive attitude to reading, improving their achievement, and fostering in them a life-long habit of reading for information and enjoyment. Teachers are also often allowed to determine how SSR will be implemented in their classrooms. When teachers are given the opportunity to select and design instructional practices, their commitment to and satisfaction with these practices often increases, and they become more successful. Furthermore, SSR, which encourages students' whole-hearted engagement in independent reading, gives teachers the opportunity to design a practice with their students' needs and preferences firmly in mind.

However, the fact that teachers often make the instructional decisions about implementation of SSR also raises some question about the integrity of the practice as it was first described by Hunt (1970). In many cases, for example, teachers or administrators restrict students' selection of reading material, but when choice is removed, intrinsic motivation to read may be diminished (Gottfried, 1990). On the other hand, it seems likely that most educators and others in the community would agree that youngsters should not be allowed to read certain material, particularly pornographic or excessively violent content. The difficulty lies in determining who will judge which material is unacceptable, and by what criteria.

Teachers and others in the community also generally believe that students should read material that is well written, interesting, and full of ideas. This probably explains some schools' and teachers' restrictions on comic books, magazines, and newspapers in favor of "literature." It can reasonably be argued, however, that if students are allowed to read material that interests them -- which, for seventh graders might include comic books -- then as their tastes and needs change, their experience with reading for pleasure will

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inspire them to read more widely, perhaps eventually selecting texts that educators would generally agree are "worthwhile."

In order to "protect" students while still allowing them some choice, personnel in some schools and districts develop lists of required or recommended readings for SSR. Given the increased interest in such issues in the community and the trend in the United States to involve families in school literacy programs, it is surprising that parents do not often become involved in development of reading lists. Also surprising is that students are not more involved in the selection process -- something that could contribute to development of intrinsic motivation. Future research should explore the relationship between student input in development of reading lists and their satisfaction with and motivation to participate in SSR programs. It would also be interesting to devise and implement a model in which school personnel, parents, and students have input into guidelines for selection of material for SSR, and to explore the resulting implications for issues relevant to censorship, inclusion of parents in literacy programs, and maximization of students' intrinsic motivation to read.

Although student choice of reading material may not often be completely unrestricted, many teachers who use SSR do give thought to the element of self-selection as an intrinsic motivator when they organize their classrooms. The widespread establishment of classroom libraries may be at least partly an effort to make books readily available to students. In addition, teachers often have a supply of books for those who come unprepared for SSR. Possibly, these teachers believe that the goals of SSR justify their structuring of the experience, while those who take disciplinary action or give lower grades in response to students' forgetting their reading material focus more on the goal of students' development of personal responsibility. Reflection on their goals and objectives for the program would be helpful to teachers as they plan for the implementation of SSR.

While it may be desirable for teachers to make the decisions about implementation of SSR in their own classrooms, it is unfortunate that some decide to exclude low-achieving students from this part of the curriculum. All too often, these students are relegated to instruction in low-level skills when they could profit considerably from more interesting activities (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). As stated earlier, several studies have shown that SSR can result in improved attitude toward reading and gains in reading achievement, with positive effects lasting into adulthood. Surely low-achieving students would benefit from exposure to such a program. Research on the effects of SSR with low-achieving students would give teachers valuable information for planning balanced literacy programs for this population.

Another area in which implementation of SSR has departed from the program's original design is in the area of modeling. The practice of requiring everyone in the school building to read during a designated SSR period is apparently not widespread. Since individual teachers in the school are often involved in the decision to implement SSR, it follows that some may decide not to participate; administrators and other staff may also choose not to read. Because teacher commitment is a contributing factor to the success of instructional practices, continued support of individual teacher choice regarding

participation in SSR is justified. However, our survey suggests that even if everyone in the building does not participate, the element of modeling is still present because the overwhelming majority of teachers who use the program read along with their students during SSR periods. Because they choose most often to read books, we might infer that they are following the same guidelines for selection of reading material that they set for their students.

The issue of evaulation and the use of follow-up activities is interesting, both because it was not part of the original design of SSR and because teachers express such firm opinions about their decisions in this area. Teachers probably make their decisions based on their philosophies and experiences, their perception of student needs, and the cultural contexts of their communities. On one hand, most teachers in the sample felt that follow-up activities and grades contradicted an essential element of SSR: to provide an opportunity for pleasure reading. On the other hand, some teachers in the sample considered follow-up activities and grades as indications of the value placed on independent reading -- that is, it is as important as any other academic activity. In addition, some felt that grades themselves inspire achievement.

Teachers in both groups appear to be following different practices for the same reason: they recognize independent reading as a means of promoting reading achievement, and they believe in the importance of motivation. The area in which they differ substantially is in the type of motivation they feel is necessary for their students. Those who do not evaluate or assign follow-up activities rely on SSR stimulating students' intrinsic motivation to read (Stipek, 1993). For them, the act of reading is an end in itself, and they feel secure in the belief that intrinsic motivation is more powerful than external recognition or reward (Gottfried, 1990). It is also possible that, in their judgment, students in the seventh grade no longer need extrinsic motivation to engage in reading (Maggart & Zintz, 1992; Stipek).

The second group of teachers may feel that at times seventh graders need some extrinsic incentive in order to increase their intrinsic motivation (Lepper, 1983). This difference of opinion may center on the fact that the middle school years are a time of transition for many children; indeed, intrinsic motivation is seen to a greater degree in secondary school. Follow-up activities also provide teachers with an opportunity to give feedback to their students, and feedback itself can increase intrinsic motivation, particularly if it is specific, frequent, and immediate (Bandura, 1969; Kulik & Kulik, 1988).

Teachers planning to implement SSR in their own classrooms must consider what types of motivation are most appropriate for their students. For those who view follow-up activities and grades as desirable, SSR as a component of a reading workshop might be appropriate. In this model, students independently read self-selected material (which may or may not be limited by teacher-imposed guidelines or by reading lists, either recommended or required) and respond to it in a variety of ways. They may do some writing about their chosen text, engage in discussions with peers, create and present a dramatic piece, or work on some other project that extends their engagement with the

reading material. In addition to providing some extrinsic incentive for reading, the rationale for these follow-up activities centers on the following precepts:

- For learning to occur, teachers must structure learning periods so that students are actively engaged in the learning process (Dewey, 1933).
- Students benefit from learning situations in which they are engaged with their peers (Vygotsky, 1978).

Further research focused on student satisfaction with SSR and student motivation to read when grades or follow-up activities are or are not used would be helpful to teachers who must make decisions in these areas.

Deciding Whether and How to Implement the Program

The first step in wrestling with the various decisions that must be made about implementing SSR is to examine curricular goals. Will SSR contribute to our students' achieving those goals? If it will, who will participate? When will SSR be implemented? Who will select the reading material? Will follow-up activities or grades be used?

The decisions and comments of the teachers who responded to our survey may be helpful to those interested in implementing SSR or in refining their existing programs. Teachers may find further valuable information at the websites on the resources list. Although the survey results suggest that many aspects of the actual practice of SSR have deviated substantially from the original design, the practice of independent reading as a part of the school day continues to be recognized as valuable.

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Formative Assessment of Reading Comprehension by Computer: Advantages and Disadvantages of The Accelerated Reader Software, an invited commentary by Keith Topping.

Questions Worth Asking about The Accelerated Reader: A Response to Topping, an invited commentary by Linda Labbo.

Survey of Sustained Silent Reading Practices

1. Is sustained silent reading (SSR) utilized at your middle/junior high school?

Yes _____ (Please proceed to question 5.)
No _____ (Please answer questions 2, 3, and 4, and questions 29 to 35.)

Please note that questions 2 to 4 are only for respondents who are not currently utilizing SSR in their classrooms. Thank you!

2. Have you ever used SSR in your reading classroom in the past?

Yes _____
No _____

3. Why are you not currently using SSR in your reading classroom?

_____
_____

4. By whom was the decision *not* to use SSR made?

Teachers _____
Administration _____
Both teachers and administration _____
Other (please explain) _____

Go to question 29.

Please answer questions 5 through 35 if you are currently utilizing SSR in your reading classroom. Thank you!

5. Indicate the terminology used to designate SSR at your school if it is other than SSR.

USSR (uninterrupted sustained silent reading) _____
DEAR (drop everything and read) _____
SQUIRT (silent, quiet, uninterrupted reading time) _____
Other (please explain) _____

6. How many years, including the current school year, has SSR been a part of your reading classroom? _____

7. Who implemented the original introduction of SSR into your curriculum?

Teachers _____
Administration _____
Both teachers and administration _____
Other (please explain) _____

8. For what reason was SSR implemented in your reading classroom?

_____
_____

9. How many days per week is SSR normally a part of your instruction assuming a full, five-day week? _____

10. How many minutes per day are utilized for SSR in your reading classroom?

_____

11. Would you like to spend more, less, or the same amount of time than you are now spending on SSR?

More time _____
Less time _____
Approximately the same amount of time _____

12. Compared to last school year, are you spending more, less, or the same amount of time on SSR during this school year?

More time _____
Less time _____
Approximately the same amount of time _____
Please explain: _____

13. Do you utilize SSR at any specific time of the day or part of the instructional period?

Yes _____
No _____
Please explain: _____

14. During SSR time, does everyone (custodians, office personnel, cafeteria personnel, etc.) in the school building participate?

Yes _____
No _____

15. Are your students graded on their SSR participation?

Yes _____
No _____
Please explain: _____

16. Please indicate the types of follow-up activities your students engage in following their SSR. (Check all that apply.)

No follow-up activities _____
Journal or log _____
Book reports (oral or written) _____
Tests _____
Other (please explain) _____

17. Does your school have required reading lists for seventh-grade students?

Yes _____
No _____

18. Does your school have recommended reading lists for seventh-grade students?

Yes _____
No _____

19. If your answer to either question 17 or 18 was "Yes," please indicate how these lists are compiled.

_____
_____
_____

20. Is there any particular type(s) of material(s) that are not allowed or are discouraged for SSR?

Yes _____
No _____

21. If your answer to question 20 was "Yes," please indicate the type(s) of material(s) that are disallowed or discouraged.

Comics _____
Magazines _____
Newspapers _____
Textbooks _____
Particular topics (please explain) _____
Particular authors (please explain) _____

22. Is there a classroom library from which students may borrow books for SSR?

Yes _____
No _____

23. Is a timing device used to indicate the beginning and end of SSR?

Yes _____
No _____

24. Does the teacher read during SSR?

Always _____
Usually _____
Sometimes _____
Never _____

25. If the teacher reads, what is the teacher reading during SSR?

Magazines _____
Mail _____
Newspapers _____
Books _____
Other (please explain) _____

26. In what way do you deal with students who chronically come to class without a book for SSR? (Check all that apply.)

Grade is lowered _____
Disciplinary action (detention, sent to office, etc.) _____
Teacher provides reading material _____
Other (please explain) _____

27. How satisfied have you been with your SSR program?
(1 = extremely dissatisfied; 5 = moderately satisfied; 10 = extremely satisfied)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

28. What has been your students' reaction to SSR?
(1 = very unfavorable; 5 = neutral; 10 = highly favorable)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

All respondents please answer the remaining questions.

29. Have you ever assessed your students' attitude toward reading?

Yes _____
No _____

30. For how many years have you been teaching reading (all levels)?

_____

31. For how many years have you been teaching reading at the seventh-grade level?

_____

32. How many students are there in the seventh grade at your school?

_____

33. What is the average size of your reading classes?

_____

34. Please indicate the type(s) of material(s) you currently use in your reading classes. (Check all that apply.)

Traditional basal _____
Literature-based basal _____
Literature based _____
Trade books _____
Short stories _____
Poetry _____
Other (please explain) _____

35. Would you like to receive a copy of the results of this survey?

Yes _____
No _____

A Word about Motivation

Motivation, the drive that causes a person to do something, is necessary for learning to occur. It can derive from personality characteristics, an expectation of success, or incentives to succeed (Maggart & Zintz, 1992).

Intrinsic motivation is a natural, inborn desire to do something -- for example, to learn to drive a car for the independence a driver's license affords. Extrinsic motivation comes from the outside -- for example, expectation of a reward might motivate certain behavior. In the context of school, extrinsic motivation such as grades or awards are not inherent to the material actually being learned.

Research suggests that, for learning, intrinsic motivation is more powerful than extrinsic motivation, but extrinsic incentives might sometimes be helpful with those for whom motivation to read is not inherent (Lepper, 1983). Such incentives can take many forms. A desire to receive high grades can be an extrinsic incentive that leads to the creation of intrinsic motivation, as are social or material rewards (Ryan & Stiller, 1991). Social rewards – including such things as notes to parents about a student's success, increased prestige among peers, reduction of homework, or increased time for social activities -- have been found to be more valuable for some students than material rewards, such as those often used in the Accelerated Reader program. If rewards of any kind are used in a school program, it is crucial that students have a reasonable expectation of success (Atkinson , 1964), truly value the rewards, and receive them frequently enough to sustain motivation (Bandura, 1969).

Another important element of any reward system, regardless of its particulars, is that it include specific feedback to students on a regular basis (Bandura, 1969; Kulik & Kulik, 1988). In response to postreading activities (including those that might follow SSR), feedback could involve comments such as:

- "I like the way that you compared the main characters. It shows that you understand both the qualities that are unique to each and those that they share."
- "I see that you are using your own life experiences to help you understand the motivations of the main character. "
- "I can see that you are using the events in the story to understand the feelings of the characters. "

Because learning cannot take place without some type of motivation, it is vital for teachers to discover what best motivates each student. This may be done by allowing the student a voice in setting his or her own goals and, if external rewards are used, in deciding what those rewards should be (Klausmeier, Jeter, Quilling, Fryer, & Allen, 1975).

A Word About Reading Workshop

Reading workshop gives students the opportunity to read a wider range of material than might be found in a basal reading series and to respond to the material in a many ways (Atwell, 1989). Teachers have used this rather broadly defined model to create various experiences for their students. Generally, a considerable block of time is set aside each day for reading workshop. During that time students typically engage in the following activities:

- reading and responding to literature
- having group minilessons on skills and strategies
- participating in individual conferences with the teacher to review progress, receive individual instruction, and make plans for future activities
- sharing reading responses with the group

When reading and responding to literature, students may work individually or in small groups. When reading individually, a student selects a text, reads it, and responds through, for example, writing, making a diorama, or collecting and displaying artifacts that represent various aspects of the piece. Students who read the same text may decide to reenact the events for themselves or for classmates in a creative drama, perhaps with a collaboratively written script. They may choose to engage in discussion about the reading material (Daniels, 1994), perhaps sharing ideas about the most exciting part of the story, how the story might have ended differently, or which parts were puzzling.

The teacher interacts with the students by providing direct instruction in skills and strategies by means of minilessons. Some teachers conduct minilessons with the whole class, but often they choose to work with small groups based on students' particular needs. For example, perhaps several children in the class have begun to write stories with dialogue but do not know how to use appropriate punctuation and paragraph structure. This is an ideal time for the teacher to form a small group to explain the mechanics of writing dialogue. The students are then monitored as they practice to develop this skill.

During reading workshop, the teacher also meets with students on an individual basis to set goals and keep track of progress, often monitoring that progress as part of portfolio assessment (Noden & Vacca, 1994). They review the student's portfolio together, check to see how the including artifacts indicate what progress has been made toward achieving goals, and set new goals. The teacher may give the child an individual lesson based on a need uncovered as the work in the portfolio is reviewed. This is also an ideal time to check on progress toward mastering a skill or strategy that was the objective of a minilesson.

Time is set aside each day for students to share their responses with the group. This may be done both at the beginning of class to spark interest and at the end of class as a way of sharing and celebrating the literacy activities of the whole group. This may also inspire others in the class to read a certain piece or to discover another method of responding to literature.

Sources of Additional Information on Reading Workshop

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Additional Internet Resources for SSR

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Byron Middle School Library and Silent Sustained Reading. (1998, April 15). From the "Byron Middle School Reading Projects" area of the Byron (Illinois, USA) Middle School site.

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